07-002212-C

Office of the Governor
State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
State House
Providence, Rhode Island 02903-1196
401-222-2080

Donald L. Carcieri
Governor

OS EXECUTIVE SECRETARIAT
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June 4, 2007

Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20230

RE: Disaster Relief for RI Commercial Fisheries

Dear Secretary Gutierrez:

On behalf of the State of Rhode Island, I am requesting declaration of a fisheries resource disaster in the northeast region and financial assistance to compensate the Rhode Island commercial fishing industry for economic losses incurred as a result of federal regulations enacted since 1994. This request is being made pursuant to Sections 312 and 315 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act as amended under the Reauthorization Act of 2006.

Since 1994, five major Amendments to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan and numerous framework actions associated with those Amendments have used effort reduction programs, increased mesh sizes, closed areas and reduced trip limits, along with a myriad of other measures aimed at reducing fishing mortality and rebuilding overfished stocks. Coincidently, Rhode Island ground fish landings have declined 66% between 1994 and 2006. Ground fish revenues also experienced a steep decline until 2006, when prices climbed in response to the low supply (Figure 1). Rising prices notwithstanding, current revenue is 33% below 1994 levels.

The two most recent actions, Amendment 13 and Framework 42, have directly impacted Rhode Island's fleet with further reductions in fishing days, reduced trip limits and designation of a large southern New England area where vessels are charged 2 days for each day fished within the area. Increased fuel and insurance costs serve as profitability disincentives for vessels to fish in ground fish areas offshore of the 2:1 counting area. Conversely, areas inshore of the counting box offer only limited ground fishing opportunities.

Regulatory actions on other species have also directly impacted the Rhode Island fleet. For example, vessels exhausting their ground fish fishing days usually switch to the squid or summer flounder fishery. Due to reduced quotas, these fisheries are periodically closed each year. While some fish stocks have shown improvement, many remain overfished and further reductions are mandated that will impact the Southern New England fleet dramatically. Since previous management actions have not resulted in achievement of target biomass levels, Amendment 16 is under development to realize the biological objectives for ground fish stocks. Further, the National Marine Fisheries Service has reduced the monkfish fishery to 12 fishing days per year in an interim action. Whiting stocks are down and effort reductions are slated for that fishery. Finally, skates, an important bait supply for the Rhode Island lobster industry, are also slated for significant regulatory actions. The combined consequences of these regulatory actions will leave vessels with few options, dealers without fish, and dockside support infrastructure without business.

I recognize that rebuilding depleted fishery resources is a long-term effort mandated by law. It may be challenged by environmental phenomenon beyond our control. For that reason, I am requesting that your agency evaluate the cumulative economic and social impacts of these management actions to the Rhode Island fishing industry and our dependent communities under the fisheries disaster relief provisions of the Act and provide the financial assistance needed to sustain this vital industry during a period of vulnerability. I look forward to working with you, our Congressional delegation, and the Service to that end.

Sincerely,

Donald L. Carcieri
Governor
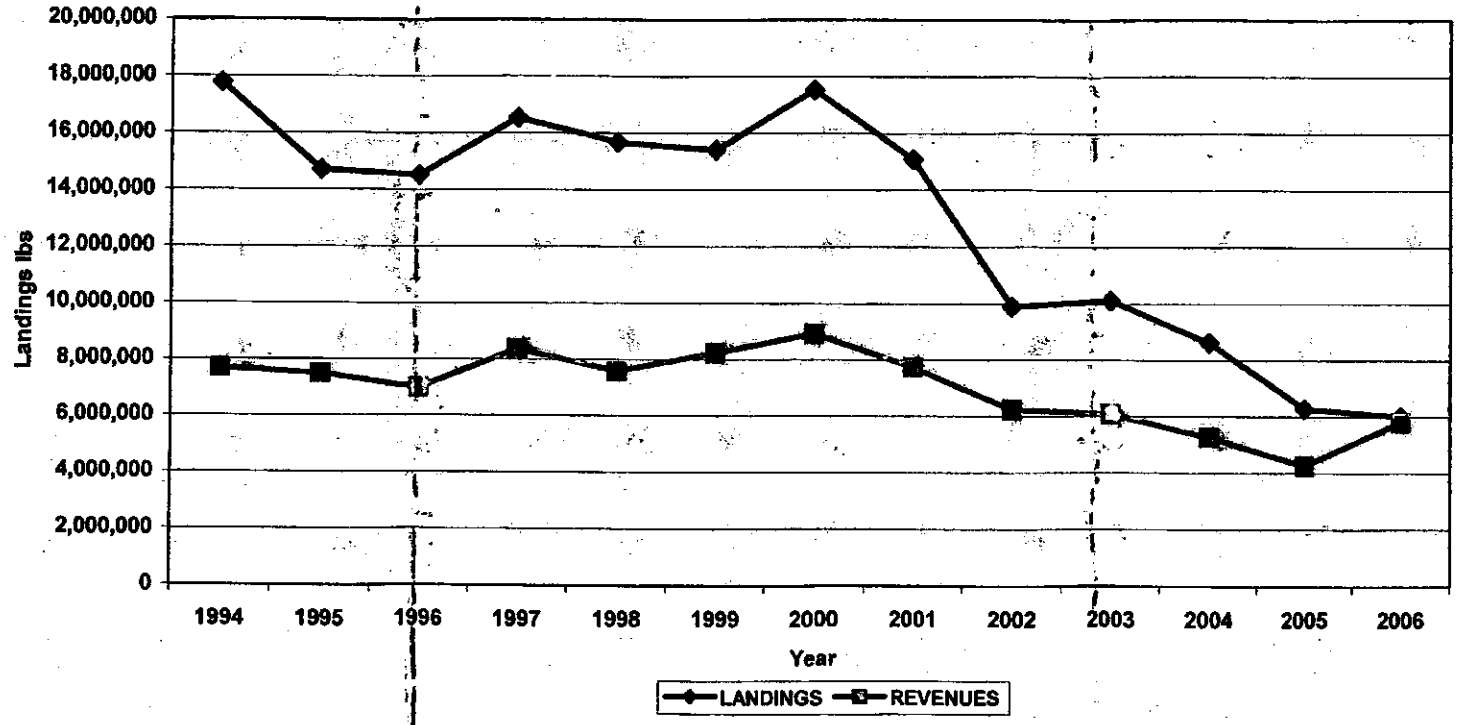
Figure 1- Landings and Revenues in the RI Groundfish Fishery, 1994-2006